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## Shaker History in the George Arents Research Library

Sandra G. Brown

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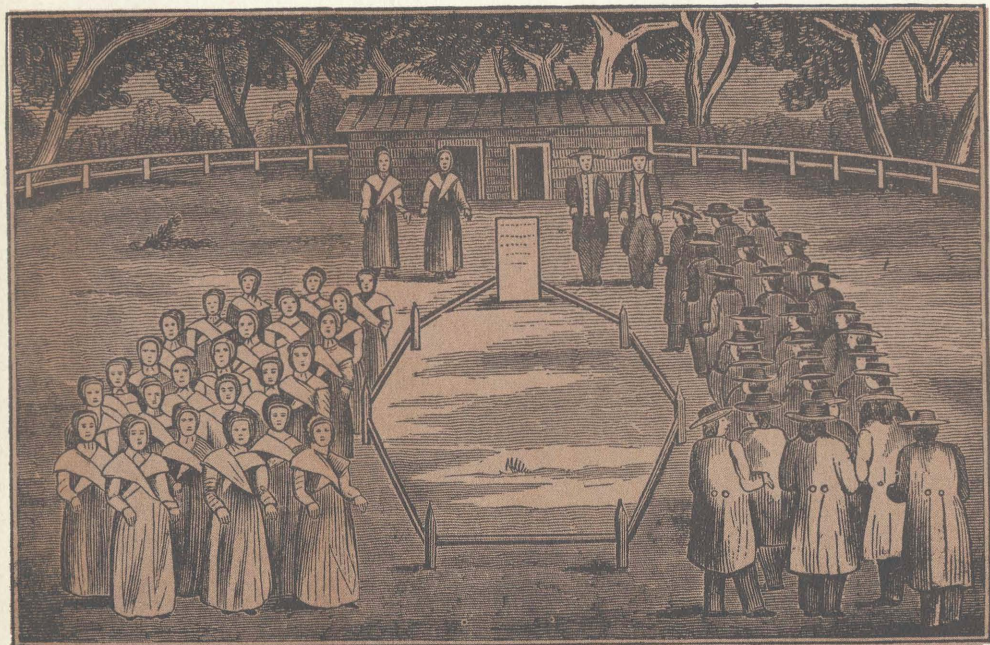
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Mountain Meeting. From *Two Years' Experience Among the Shakers* by David Lamson. West Boylston: Published by the Author. 1848.

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# *Shaker History in the George Arents Research Library*

by Sandra G. Brown

*The Oneida Community and Shaker collections in the George Arents Research Library complement each other as opportunities for research in socio-religious utopianism. The Shakers differ from the Oneida Communists in that the former are a celibate sect. They are similar, however, as examples of 19th century experiments in communal living and industry.*

*All titles mentioned below are in the Shaker Collection in the Rare Book Department of the Library.*

On August 6, 1744, Ann Lee, the founder of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, and seven of her followers arrived with the ship *Mariah* at the port of New York. They had come from England where they had been the objects of scorn and persecution. Visions had directed them to America, promising the establishment of a shining millennial church in the new land. Approximately three hundred primary and secondary sources in the Shaker Collection at Syracuse show the visions coming true in the 1850's when there were some six thousand members in eighteen Shaker communities. However, they also show the Society's subsequent decline to a present-day membership of a number only slightly above the original eight.

Shaker doctrine is based on certain fundamental beliefs: that God is both Father and Mother in nature and that Christ has appeared on earth twice, first in male form as Jesus of Nazareth and second in female form as Mother Ann Lee. The Shakers were convinced of the virtue of leading a celibate life that included not only a strict separation of the sexes but also sexual equality. In addition, they believed in the holding of all property in common, in divine inspiration, and in spiritual phenomena.

These basic tenets are discussed in *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing* . . . by Elder Benjamin S. Youngs, a work that has been called the Shaker Bible. The more than six hundred page volume is the first and most authoritative Shaker theological work. First published in 1808, it was issued

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*Mrs. Brown is a Rare Book bibliographer in the George Arents Research Library.*

in four editions between that date and 1856. The Arents Library holds two editions: the second, edited by Youngs and Seth Y. Wells, 1810, and the fourth, rewritten by Youngs and Calvin Green, 1856.

Two early accounts of the Shakers were written by members of the outside world who had at one time been Shakers themselves. The older of the works is *An Account of the People Called Shakers . . .* by Thomas Brown, printed in Troy, N. Y. in 1812. The other volume was written by William J. Haskett, is entitled *Shakerism Unmasked, or The History of the Shakers . . .*, and was published by the author in 1828. While these works were written by men prejudiced against the sect, they do describe in detail their impressions of Shaker beliefs, government, manner of life and religious ceremonies.

In spite of the fact that the Shakers felt that all their activities were methods of worshipping God, they established formal religious meetings. At these services the members of the community rejoiced by dancing and singing. The first mode of Shaker worship to be formalized was the square order shuffle which was developed as early as 1785. While performing this dance, the brothers and sisters shook their hands as a symbolic gesture of shaking sin and evil out of their bodies; hence the name Shakers.

Music was described in the preface of the first Shaker hymnal as "a gift in which Believers can best unite their feelings of joy and thanksgiving for the gospel—in which they can lift up their voices together in praise to God."<sup>1</sup> The 1813 hymnal is only one of the Shaker musical works in the collection, the latest of which is a 1961 reprint of the 1908 *Shaker Hymnal* by the Canterbury (N. H.) Shakers.

By 1800 the Shakers numbered approximately one thousand members in eleven northeastern communities. It was then that they began thirty years of active and successful missionary work. An 1805 mission into Ohio and Kentucky became the subject of the first substantial Shaker publication. Entitled *The Kentucky Revival . . .*, the work was written by Richard McNemar, a newly converted member of the sect. It was first published in 1807 and is represented at Syracuse by the first and second reprints, both of which are dated 1808, and by an 1846 printing.

The new Shaker communities in the west often were the victims of religious prejudice and even violence. Elder Benjamin S. Youngs discussed an incident that occurred on August 27, 1810 at the Union Village, Ohio community in a short pamphlet, *Transactions of the Ohio Mob, Called in the Public Papers "An Expedition against the Shakers."* In it he tells of a large mob that gathered at the community to demand that the members release certain children and renounce certain beliefs. The mob dispersed only after the community buildings had been searched and no evidence of forced labor by unwilling converts had been found.

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<sup>1</sup> *Millennial Praises*, Hancock: Printed by Josiah Tallcott, Junior, 1813, p. [iii.]

## SECTION V.

Of Vanity. *Vanity*

1. There are two states of the human mind, that are very distinct, one from the other, and can easily be understood, by any one of common sense; and these are, *Seriousness*, and its opposite, *which will call vanity*, but *unseriousness* is the true meaning. *Vanity* *J*
2. It is by seriousness, and that alone, that any good can be gained, or any virtuous principle be planted or supported in the mind of any one, of whatever age.
3. Take a child, for instance, of eight or ten years of age, whose ways you can comprehend better than you can those of much riper age and experience than yourselves. Suppose one of you was set to teach this child, and lead him in all respects, in the way he should go, and instruct him in all points in that which would be for his future welfare, and his greatest gain; and what could you do with him, what would he learn, or what good could he possibly gain, if he were void of seriousness, or if he would give no serious attention to any of your instructions?
4. And, as it is with children, so it is with youth, and also with riper years; nothing good can be gained, but by the exercise of a serious, reflecting mind. But the spirit of *vanity* is ever at war with all serious *Vanity*

*Vanity may be serious, vain people may be serious in their vanity.*

reflection. Yea, *vanity*, that bewitching and destructive evil, is opposed to all good. *Vanity*

5. And do you, O lovely youth, indulge in *vanity*, freely and carelessly, without thinking how you conduct yourselves? If you do, then we say, O beware, and turn from it, before it be too late; or, like the confirmed drunkard, you will waste your whole substance, and ruin your honor and happiness, and bring much distress on all with whom you are connected. *Vanity*

6. *Vanity*, when indulged, is one of the most dangerous evils that can beset rational creatures. It is true, there are passions and propensities, more directly sinful, which, being more apparent, are shunned on the account; but *vanity* is more secret, and works out of sight. While unserious minds do not consider that there can be much harm, if any, in being a little light and vain, and thus they are led from one degree to another into that which is really wrong. *Vanity*

7. *Vanity* is a fruitful soil for every evil plant; but no good plant can grow there, no virtuous principle can possibly take root therein. *Vanity* leads directly into the by and forbidden paths of every sin. It releases all feelings of restraint against the passions of human nature; it raises the sense above that low and humble state of mind, so indispensable to make one upright and virtuous. *Vanity*

8. Under the influence of this spirit, no one can receive admonition, warning, or instruction; and without these, how is it possible for any one to grow into the principles of virtue and goodness? No serious feeling



In winning over converts, the Shakers needed basic works which explained their beliefs. One of the books published for the purpose was Elder Harvey L. Eads' *Shaker Sermons: Scripto-Rational*. There are four editions of this work in the Shaker Collection, including the first which is dated 1879. The most interesting of them is the copy of the second edition because after its publication the Mount Lebanon, N. Y. Shaker ministry ordered all copies of the edition burned for reasons that have not been identified. The second edition copy also is a signed presentation copy from Eads to Adlai E. Stevenson dated February 2, 1886. Another general work designed to aid in the presentation of Shaker beliefs was compiled by Carl Julius Preter and published by the Union Village, Ohio community in 1888. One of two tracts published by the sect in German, the title is *Eine Furze Beschreibung des Glaubens und Praktischen Lebens der Verein. Gesellschaft Gläubiger in Christi Zweiter Erscheinung, Gewöhnlich Genannt "Shäkers."*

The Shakers welcomed visitors into their communities and to their worship services. Of the many that came some decided to remain as members of the Society. Of the others, a number including Edward S. Abdy, Charles Dickens and James Fenimore Cooper wrote their impressions of the sect in travel diaries which were published later.

Edward S. Abdy, a British traveler in America, tells in his *Journal* of his 1833 trip to the Watervliet, N. Y. community. Throughout the account Abdy seems to be impressed by the intelligence, wit and industry of the Shakers.<sup>2</sup> He discussed the fact that from what he understood, the formerly grotesque Shaker religious dancing was becoming less spectacular. He then concluded that "visitors will content themselves with the picture of a happy and harmless community, usefully employed and exempt from most of the cares and follies of civilized society."<sup>3</sup>

Charles Dickens' opinion of the Shakers differs greatly from Abdy's. In his *American Notes*, Dickens describes the Shakers he met at the New Lebanon, N. Y. community in 1842 as grim and cold.<sup>4</sup> He said he detested the sect's "bad spirit . . . which would strip life of its healthful graces, rob youth of its innocent pleasures, pluck from maturity and age their pleasant ornaments, and make existence but a narrow path towards the grave."<sup>5</sup> His narrative concluded by stating that he left the Shaker village "with a hearty dislike of the old Shakers, and a hearty pity for the young ones."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Edward S. Abdy, *Journal of Residence and Tour in the United States of America, from April, 1833, to October, 1834*, 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1835), vol. 1, pp. 254-262.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262

<sup>4</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* [1st American ed.] (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1842), pp. 79-80.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

While James Fenimore Cooper found the Shakers themselves to be orderly and industrious and models of decency, cleanliness and morality, he felt that the sect was founded on fanaticism and folly and thus appealed only to the consciences of the most ignorant. He recorded his analysis of the Shakers, based on visits to three Shaker communities, in his 1828 *Notions of the Americans*.<sup>7</sup> His account of the sect also pointed out that the communistic structure of the Shaker organization needed to be provided for in the legal machinery of the various states. Cooper felt that the laws were "far too wise and too humane to give their deluded followers any trouble" and that "the courts have interpreted the laws as humanely in their favour as circumstances would reasonably allow."<sup>8</sup> Such legal benevolence, if ever achieved, was the result only of the sect's fighting many difficult legal battles. For example, the Shaker order often found itself involved in suits with seceders from its number. Upon joining the sect, all persons agreed to a covenant which stated that their interest in the material holdings of the community only consisted of the right to use those holdings as members of the Church. In spite of that agreement, those withdrawing from membership often would try to sue the Shakers for services rendered or property consecrated. Gradually, through legal battles, the covenant was held to be binding and all such suits were denied. In 1828, in the midst of a case of this nature, the Shaker community at Pleasant Hill, Ky. published a forty-seven page pamphlet by Richard McNemar. Entitled *Investigator; or A Defence of the Order, Government & Economy of the United Society Called Shakers, against the Sundry Charges & Legislative Proceedings*, it is the Shaker reply to a law which made it easier for seceders to prosecute their suits. In 1834, however, the Kentucky Court of Appeals renewed the validity of the covenant.

Another area in which the Shakers often found themselves involved in lawsuits was that of child custody. It was the custom of the Society to receive children into its number when they were accompanied by one parent who had deserted the other. The first and best known case of this kind concerned the children of Mary Dyer. Mrs. Dyer had joined the Enfield, N. H. community with her husband and three children in 1811. Four years later she left the community and filed suits to regain custody of her children. In order to strengthen her case she wrote and had printed many bitter works against the sect. One of these is *The Rise and Progress of the Serpent from the Garden of Eden, to the Present Day; With a Disclosure of Shakerism . . .* While she lost her cases in the courts, Mary Dyer's writings succeeded in prejudicing many against the Shakers.

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<sup>7</sup> [James Fenimore Cooper] *Notions of the Americans: Picked Up by a Travelling Bachelor*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Carey, 1828), vol. 2, pp. 247-250.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.



The Society had to be alert to any laws which might weaken their legal status. Thus, in 1839, to prevent New York state laws from invalidating their property rights, the Shakers successfully lobbied for the passage of an act which permitted them to hold property that produced an annual income of not more than \$5,000. In 1850, however, the State Senate, fearing the Society was increasing its holdings, required the Shakers to report on their real estate holdings and financial affairs. The *Report of the Trustees of the United Society of Shakers in the town of New Lebanon, Columbia Co., N. Y.* was published as the State of New York Senate Report, no. 89, of March 19, 1850. Investigation into the matter resulted in the extension of the sect's charter allowing them an annual income of \$25,000.

The official transcript of the trial testimony in a 1905-06 case between the Mount Lebanon, N. Y. community and one of its neighbors, Miss Olive Hand, is included in the Shaker Collection. The case, heard in the Supreme Court of Columbia County, concerned the exact location of the boundary between the two properties. Inserted in the typescript are two pages of manuscript notes by the surveyor and a clipping from *The Hudson Evening Register* announcing that the Shakers had lost their case.

The Shakers farmed the land they owned in each community, raising crops and animals both for their own consumption and for sale to the outside world. The production and packaging of seeds and herbs was one of the largest Shaker industries and there are reminders of the importance of these crops in the collection. An example is the extensive *Catalogues of Medicinal Plants, Barks, Roots, Seeds, Flowers and Select Powders, with Their Therapeutic Qualities and Botanical Names . . .* published by the New Lebanon community and printed in Albany by Van Benthuysen about 1851. Another similar item is the *Gardener's Manual . . .* published in 1843 by the New Lebanon community. While their seeds were of the highest quality, the Shakers had found "that good seeds are sometimes condemned for want of a fair trial."<sup>9</sup> Thus to protect their reputation, they wrote the above manual as a means of instructing dealers and customers with little gardening experience. The ephemeral material on this topic includes the wrapper for a package of superfine flour of the Slippery Elm and a poster advertising the Shaker Tamar Laxative, a popular tonic made by the Society.

The Shaker brethren designed and constructed the communities' buildings and furniture, farmed the land and worked at many trades. The work of the Shaker carpenters is especially well-known and has been highly praised for the beauty of its simplicity. Some of their products, such as various types of chairs, footstools and oval boxes, were made not only for use within the community but also to sell to non-members. The sect published illustrated catalogues of items for sale, several of which such as an *Illustrated*

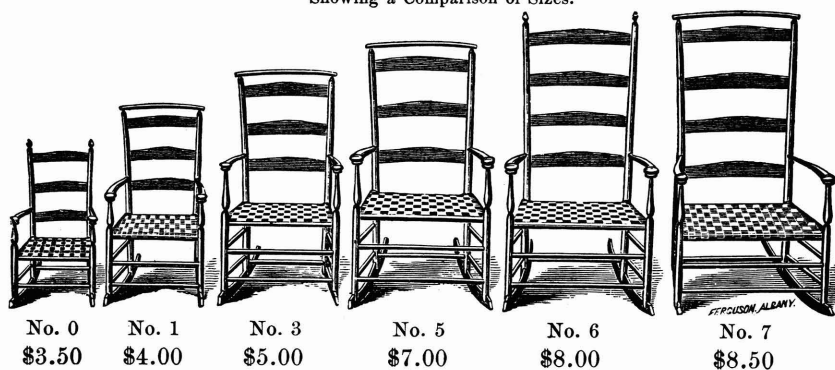
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<sup>9</sup> *Gardener's Manual . . .* (New Lebanon, N. Y.: The United Society, 1843), p. [ii.]

## The Shakers' Slat Back Chairs, with Arms and Rockers.

WORSTED LACE SEATS.

Showing a Comparison of Sizes.



From *Illustrated Catalog and Price List of Shakers' Chairs, Manufactured by the Society of Shakers*. Mount Lebanon, N. Y. R. M. Wagan & Co. 1874.

*Catalogue and Price List of Shakers' Chairs, Manufactured by the Society of Shakers* are included in the Shaker Collection.

The Shaker sisters were in charge of the domestic duties of the community. Two of the published works which discuss their work and methods are *Mary Whitcher's Shaker House-Keeper* and *Receipts as Used by the Shakers*. The women also made baskets, cloaks, bonnets and other articles for sale to those outside the community. A catalogue of such items is entitled *Products of Intelligence and Diligence*.

The Shakers also were known for their inventive ability. A recent (1957) pamphlet in the collection, *Consecrated Ingenuity: The Shakers and Their Inventions* by John S. Williams, describes the vertical saw, designed about 1812 by Sister Sarah Babbitt of the Harvard, Mass. community; a tilting device which enables chairs to be rocked or tilted without danger of slipping; the Shaker Washing Machine, an improvement on the previous machine, many of which were made by the Canterbury, N. H. Shakers and sold to the general public; an efficient and profit-making method of producing metal pens; the spring-type clothes pin and significant improvements on the iron Franklin stove. The Shaker flat broom industry was a profitable enterprise based on Brother Theodore Bates' invention of a wooden vise that flattened the round broom and then held it while it was stitched to maintain its flat form.

The children of the community, having been brought to the Shakers either as orphans or as sons and daughters of newly converted members, were taught trades and given a practical education comprised of such studies as reading, writing, etiquette and music. Among its works related to education

the Shaker Collection has a unique copy of the second edition of the 1823 *A Juvenile Monitor*, a book of etiquette for children. The Arents copy of *A Juvenile Guide, or Manual of Good Manners* was printed in 1844 by the United Society of Canterbury, N. H. and has extensive manuscript corrections by Elder Joseph Wicker of the Hancock, Mass. community. Wicker's notations are particularly interesting as he was not among the authors of the work. The first edition was compiled by Rufus Bishop, Garnett Lawrence and Isaac Newton Youngs. The second edition was revised by Giles B. Avery and the third was revised by Henry C. Blinn.

There are two books in the collection which were intended never to be read by those outside the Shaker faith. The first, *The Youth's Guide in Zion, and Holy Mother's Promises*, was written by Elisha D. Blakeman while in a trance. The message it contains is believed to be from Holy Mother Wisdom, the female spirit of God, personified by Mother Ann Lee. The work consists first of spiritual lessons and then the Holy Mother's promises to all those who faithfully learned and followed the lessons. It was kept by the Society's elders and lent only to community members for a short period of time. The second work, *The Gospel Monitor*, is well described by its subtitle: *A Little Book of Mother Ann's Word to Those Who Are Placed as Instructors & Care-takers of Children; written by Mother Lucy Wright* . . . There are four parts to the work: first, an interview between the writer and Mother Ann; second, Mother Ann's instructions to the care-takers; third, her words to the children; and fourth, her words to the elders.

The scope of the Shaker Collection at Syracuse is broad. The approximately three hundred titles include all but a very few of the important printed works by or about the sect, thereby serving exceptionally well to illustrate the history of the Shakers in America.

